

Mortality within Religious Houses

Group 1

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Introduction

The Black Death's arrival in Europe in the 14th Century, by the Genoese's arrival in the Sicilian city of Messina, brought one of the most significant epidemics in world history to the doorsteps of Europe.

The mass death brought by the Yersinia pestis into Europe would affect those of all social classes, from peasants to nobility, including even the most pious of clergy. Historians estimate that in some parts of Europe, the experienced a 90% population decline, as the disease rightfully earned the name Black Death.

The clergy's mortality during the plague is the focal point of this presentation, as several records from the Horrox book are used to examine mortality in religious houses and provide insight into how the clergy's role in society made them more

susceptible to infection. While the records are varied from France to the Ottoman Empire, the majority of our records are from England and Italy.



Burying plague victims. Miniature by Pierart dou Tielt (Tournai, circa 1353).



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France

By Cal Diorio

The plague began to make its way towards France in 1347. It made its way towards civilization through several different avenues. One of the heavily infected forces to enter was an invading Tartar army, which is said to have had a survival rate of 1 in 20 (Gilles li Muisis, 46). Despite this, it wasn't until 1348 that the plague cemented itself within France. Besides the Tartar army, the disease reached the French people through land and sea; with accounts describing 'unbelievable' death rates in Marseilles, Montpellier, Provence, and Avignon.

According to the monks of St Denis' Chronicle of accounts, the plague first broke out in the town of Roissy. From there, it reached Paris, where at its height had around 800 people dying every day (Jules Viard, 58).

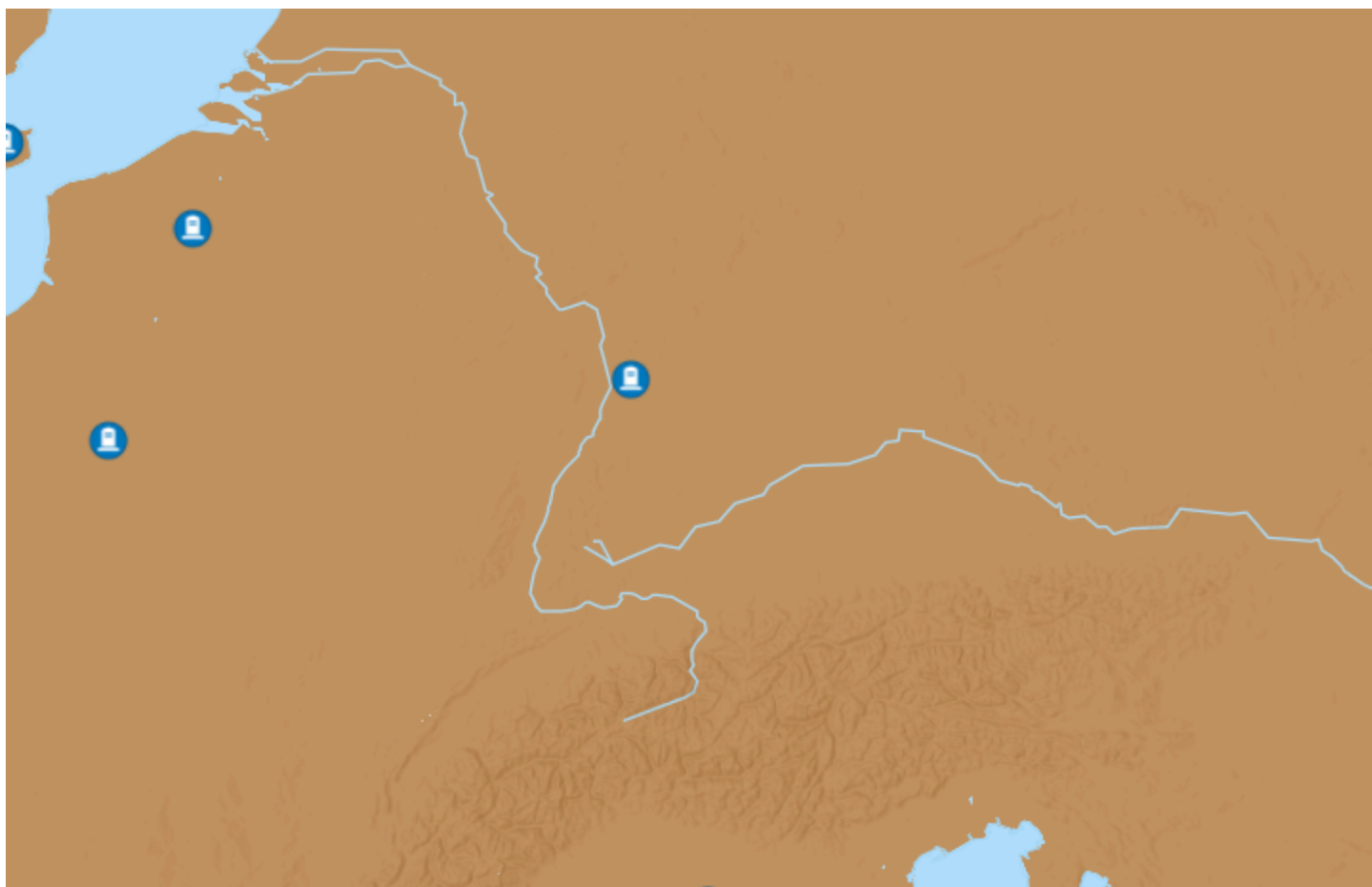
Many accounts of this mortality included members of the clergy and religious houses. Monasteries were a large contributor to the recorded accounts of the area. One such example of this is from the Benedictine monastery of St Giles in Tournai. The abbot of this monastery "hunted out the most reliable [accounts] and the most accurate information I could find in concerning the mortality, and here record it in writing so that future generations may have knowledge of it" (Gilles li Muisis, 46). This chronicle included the death of Bishop Jean des Prés of Tournai. Prior to his death, he left the city after hearing about the rising mortality. Clergy who had the means to travel frequently became more susceptible to the plague due to exposure and fatigue and were at higher risk of spreading it due to their exposure to the masses. This Bishop in particular had traveled to perform a divine service in a cathedral (Gilles li Muisis, 51). Many members of the clergy were infected by following out these duties. More so, as mortality grew among the populace, "the dead were carried into churches" (Gilles li Muisis, 51), estimating between 5 - 30 per day. This effected the priests, parish clerks, and those hired to dig the graves alike. By Christmas of 1348, over 25,000+ people had died in Tournai, most of which were members of the upper class. Members of the clergy who spent time with the sick and dead and heard confessions and administered the sacraments were among the highest mortality rates (Gilles li Muisis, 53). Due to this outbreak "the result was that the cowardly priests took themselves off" (Jean de Venette, 55), meaning that many clergy abandoned their posts in fear for their lives. Due to this, the Pope – who was based in Avignon at this point in time – gave the people the authority to absolve the dying of their sins. This was done mostly because of the shortage of clergy (Jean de Venette, 56).

During the height of this outbreak, people of all classes and backgrounds would flock to monasteries in hopes of finding shelter; whether it be spiritual or physical. In France, some of those monasteries included St Peter at Hennagau and St Médard at Soissons (Gilles li Muisis, 54). This served as a major mode of infection among clergy in France. It's also

worth noting that the Pope residing in France during this time heightened the religious proclivities of the people.



"Three Living and Three Dead" From from a Book of Hours, France (Paris), c. 1480 – c. 1490



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Austria

By Jerry Jerabek

The country known today as Austria was in the first half of the 1300s ruled by the House of Austria, better known today as the House of Habsburg, or simply the Habsburgs--the same family that would continuously and solely rule the Holy Roman Empire for three hundred years beginning in 1440. Plague first arrived in Austria sometime in 1348, in the south of the country (Rosemary Horrox, 59); by the spring or summer of the following year it had spread north to the Habsburg capital of Vienna--also in modern-day Austria (Joseph P. Byrne, x). The *Continuatio Novimontensis*, written around 1350 at Neuberg an der Mürz directly along the plague's northerly warpath, describes how the Black Death was only the second of two tragedies to hit the country in 1348. The first was a terrible earthquake in January, which dealt considerable damage to the great buildings of the region, including Neuberg Abbey--then still under construction (Rosemary Horrox, 59). The crisis brought some unity to the contentious Habsburg ruling class, who "allied in friendship" and fled to "safer places"--likely referring to more remote estates elsewhere--in a doomed attempt to escape infection. This left monks, clergy, and commoners to be plague's main victims in Neuberg and the surrounding region. In general Austria turned to the church for protection from the pandemic, and when that failed priests, monks, and flagellants alike would teach their

surviving flocks that it was a deserved punishment from God (Rosemary Horrox, 60-61).



Neubeurg Abbey in 2007. The Abbey was built over a century between the 1300s and 1400s, its construction weathering both an earthquake and the arrival of plague.



England

By Kenny Vo

The plague arrived to mainland Britain in August of 1348, where several accounts of its first arrival was recorded in Bristol. Bristol is located in Southern England by the Celtic Sea. It was recorded that merchants and sailors carried the plague to the city, and the plague in mainland England lasted for an entire year. Bristol, and other towns (Melcombe, Dorset, Gascony) were heavily devastated by the plague, specifically Bristol, where "very few were left alive," and as a result, there was a shortage of people who were able to "look after the sick and bury the dead" (F.S. Haydon, 63-64). Some pregnant

women died with their babies to the plague. In comparison to the general population, the clergy was also heavily impacted by the arrival of the plague. The Bishop of Rochester, Hamo Hethe, lost "4 priests, 5 squires, 10 household servants, 7 young clerks and 6 pages," leaving almost nobody in office who can serve him (Harrox, 71).

The plague soon moved from Southern England up towards Northern England. In Meaux Abbey, the monastery there was heavily impacted by the plague. Over 30 monks and lay brothers were killed, and the shortage of people in the monastery led to the dwindling of rents and goods, as the "majority of [the] tenants had died... [and] the survivors made misguided grants of the goods and possessions of the monastery" (E.A Bond). This happened in several areas too, as the shortage of tenants and working-able people in affected towns led to a collapse in agriculture, economy, and workforce. According to the *Chronicle of the Cistercian Abbey*, it was assumed that "the hand of Almighty God struck the human race" with the plague (E. Venables, 66). Nobody had ever seen a plague so fatal that it is thought that "a great multitude of people were not killed in Noah's Flood" compared to the plague (E. Venables, 67). In the British capital of London, the plague impacted the general population in many negative ways, specifically emotionally. It was also recorded that many Londoners believed God was punishing them and the rest of humanity.



Map of Bristol (1250-1350) - From 'Memoirs Historical and Topographical of Bristol and its Neighbourhood', Rev Samuel Seyer, 1823



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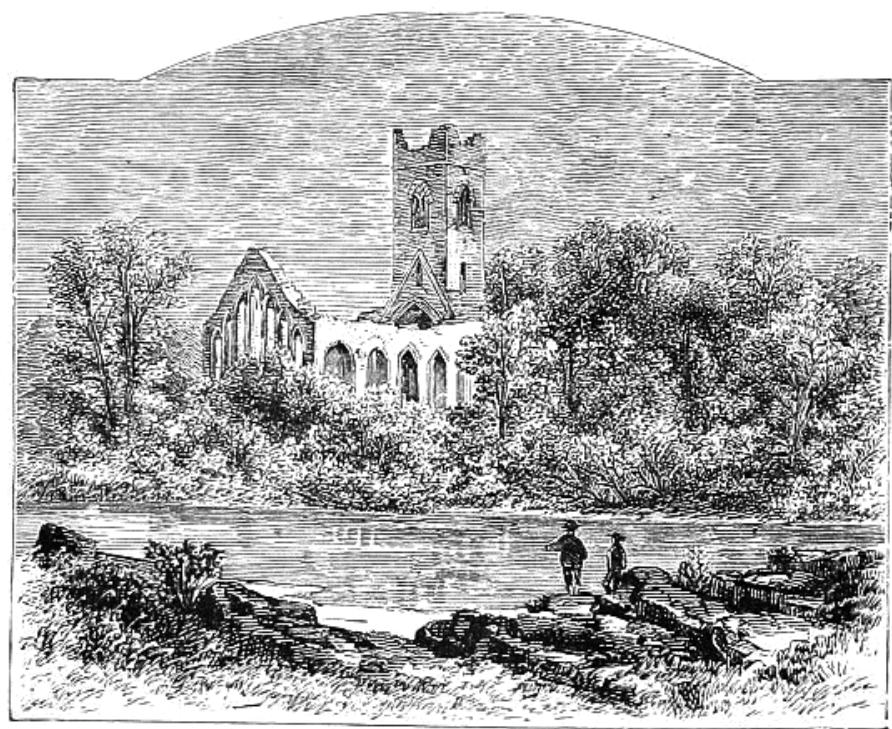
Ireland

By Cal Diorio

Ireland, being on the coast, was infected around the same time as England in 1348. But some Irish people who were living away from the coast in more mountainous areas were able to escape the plague until 1357 (E.M. Thompson, 82). When the plague did arrive in Ireland, it was through an English settlement nearby called the Pale, before infecting Dublin, Howth, and Drogheda. In 5 months, 14,000 people died in Dublin alone (John Clynn, 82). During the fall of 1348, there was a large pilgrimage to Tech-Moling. This group consisted of many members of religious orders, including bishops, prelates, and ecclesiastics. Most of the people on the journey “the majority in fact, came because their fear of the plague which was then raging” (John Clynn, 82). By this point, the plague had killed so many that the churches didn’t have room for any more bodies and clergy had to create new burial grounds.

Though Ireland is one of the regions that we don’t have a ton of information about regarding clergy, it provides an essential role in connecting different regions together through spatial data. Most of the information above is from the Franciscan friar, John Clynn. Through his account we are able to build a narrative around how the plague traveled from England to Ireland, how the clergy on the pilgrimage was effected, and even a rare account of a community that was left untouched

for almost a decade after the outbreak. This regions clergy faces many of the same challenges as their compatriots in other regions, and were components in spreading the plague through their travel.



The Franciscan Friary.

A Franciscan Friary. John Clynn's place of writing via archive.org



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Scotland

By Jerry Jerabek

Scotland had been undergoing nearly fifty years of political instability in its quest to purge the realm of English occupation when Y. pestis first reached its borders in 1349 or

1350. So when reports came that a strange illness was striking down the enemy left and right, they initially received it as the judgement of God upon the English and England, which had by then been infected since the fall of 1348 (Joseph P. Byrne, x; 200). In 1350 John of Fordun, a so-called “secular priest” and historian in Aberdeen on the east coast, wrote the following, rather jubilant, description of plague: “By God’s will this evil [of the English occupation] led to a strange and unwonted kind of death, in so much that the flesh of the sick was somehow puffed out and swollen, and they dragged out their earthly life for barely two days” (Joseph P. Byrne, 79).

The Scottish would change their tune quite quickly, however, once the Black Death began taking out their own people as well. The *Scotichronicon* preserves reports that worldwide “fully a third of the human race was killed,” from all strata of society but particularly the middle and lower classes (Rosemary Horrox, 84-85). As in France and England, it may be surmised that the clergy were also particularly represented among the dead, given their typical ministry to the sick and dying and Scotland’s thorough conversion to Catholicism by the High Middle Ages. There is some evidence that priests in Scotland--as in almost everywhere else in Europe--were spread rather thin during and after the Second Pandemic, serving multiple parishes at once to make up for the significant dwindling of their numbers at the time. Friars and mendicants also likely stepped up to the plate in Scotland as elsewhere to continue rendering spiritual services to their communities--albeit in a less official or Rome-sanctioned capacity--throughout the period (Joseph P. Byrne, 117-119; Andrew D.M. Barrell, 244-245).



A 15th-century depiction of the Battle of Neville's Cross between the Scottish and English occupiers only two years before plague's arrival in Scotland.



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Italy

By Benji Davis

The plague arrived in the Italian Peninsula in October 1347, with the arrival of ships from the city of Genoa. The first city to have been hit was the Sicilian city of Messina, reporting “The Genoese carried such a disease in their bodies that if anyone so much as spoke with one of them he was infected” (Michele da Piazza, 36) In response to the arrival of the plague, the Clergy began to stop conducting services; it was reported that those who continued with the ceremonies fell ill quickly. In an attempt to help the people, the Patriarch of Messina brought holy water blessed by the relics of Saint Agatha to bless them.

The plague would quickly spread to mainland Italy as people “abandoned their city, their homes, their relatives, their estates, and their belongings” (Boccaccio, 30). By 1348, the plague quickly spread to Florence and its surrounding areas, prompting people to seek refuge. The plague would kill so many that the clergy could not keep up with the demand of funeral rites, and it became common for clergy and family members to die in transporting the deceased to their burial grounds, turning a burial site into a pile of bodies.

On the other hand, the plague arrived in Piacenza from “Some Genoese, whom the disease had forced to flee” (Mussis, 21) their home. Through the selling of their goods, the disease

spread quickly to their hosts and merchants. The disease would spread to the local clergy, who had barricaded themselves in their churches. However, the clergy of the Dominican, Franciscan, Augustinian, and Carmelite orders had their head friar die, and any other priests or people who sought refuge with them followed their fate.



Bobbio Abbey



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Ottoman Empire

By Jerry Jerabek

The Ottoman Empire--centered in present-day Turkey--was a fledgling nation in bitter competition with the Byzantine Empire when the Second Pandemic began in the mid-fourteenth century. This was probably in late 1347, the same

time that Constantinople, Messina, Alexandria, and Sicily were first struck by plague, with the rest of Europe soon to follow (Joseph P. Byrne, ix). Caffa, a Genoese port city on the Crimean peninsula eventually brought within the Ottoman fold, is cited as a sort of "ground zero" for *Y. pestis* in Europe, with its first crossing of the Black Sea having been dated to mere months after the Tartars lifted their 1345-1347 siege of the city (Hannah Barker, 120).

Given that the Ottoman Empire was officially a sultanate governed by and for Muslims, by and large, information on how Christian religious houses within what were at this time fluid and expanding Ottoman borders were impacted by the plague is scarce. Nevertheless the English cleric Henry Knighton (d. ~1396) does preserve for us an estimate of plague casualties in the Ottoman city of Tarsus--birthplace of Saint Paul and no doubt home to many Christian monks and clergy during the Second Pandemic--in his *Chronicon Henrici Knighton*. This estimate is that 8,000 "legions," i.e. somewhere around 33.6-48 million Ottoman Tarsites, were killed by the Black Death in 1348. Knighton is careful to note that this figure is "not counting Christians" in the city, who presumably would have inflated it even further (Rosemary Horrox, 76).



Orhan Ghazi, son of Osman I and Sultan of the Ottoman Empire during the time of plague's arrival.

In conclusion, the quantitative and qualitative analysis of Horrox's book provides enough information to paint a narrative through our given information. Regarding Clergy specifically, some regions have better data than others, but they all tell similar stories. Due to the clergy's role in providing for those infected, both physically and spiritually, they put themselves in direct danger of infection. This caused the rapid spread of the plague in places like Monasteries due to the congregation of people. With the data being as sporadic

as it is, it is difficult to have a concrete ratio of deaths among clergy to the general population's mortality. While some clergy members performed their duties even under the risk of infection, there are also accounts of them abandoning their posts. The spatially drawn conclusion can be made from the movement of the people between churches and the clergy's movements between different towns. This common theme offers an explanation for both the mortality rates and the method of infection.

Besides their role in infection, the church played a massive role in the people's mentality towards the plague. They offered explanations for the plague through inciting god's wrath. Though this was not a comforting thought, in the confusion of these times, any explanation at all was welcoming.

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Artwork

"Battle of Neville's Cross." Miniature by Jean Froissart. Public Domain via [wikimedia.org](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Jean_Froissart_-_The_Battle_of_Neville's_Cross_-_A_14th_Century_Minature.jpg). From Folio 97 of Ms. Fr. 2643 of Froissart's *Chronicles* in the Bibliotheque Nationale de France, Paris. Jean Froissart, circa 1400.

"Burying plague victims." Miniature by Pierart dou Tielt (Tournai, circa 1353).

"Former Neuberg an der Mürz Abbey, Styria, Austria." Photograph by Marion Schneider and Christoph Aistleitner. Public Domain via [wikimedia.org](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Neuberg_Abbey.jpg). Marion Schneider and Christoph Aistleitner, 2007.

"Map of Bristol between 1250 and 1350." From 'Memoirs Historical and Topographical of Bristol and its Neighbourhood'. Rev Samuel Seyer, 1823.

"Orhan Ghazi." Detail from a miniature by Unknown. Public Domain via [wikimedia.org](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Orhan_Ghazi.jpg). From the Topkapi Palace Museum, Istanbul. Unknown, circa 1500.

"The Franciscan Friary." Public Domain via [archive.org](https://archive.org/details/history-and-antiquities-of-the-diocese-of-ossory-vol-3-sealy-bryers-walker-1905/page/n5/mode/2up). Taken from *The History and Antiquities of the Diocese of Ossory*. Vol. 3, Sealy, Bryers & Walker, 1905.

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